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Insurgents and the Flip Side of Special Operations

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While the Islamic State's physical caliphate is no more, it is clear that the group has successfully transitioned back to a uniform insurgency contesting for influence in areas of Syria and Iraq. Certainly, its far-flung affiliates in Asia and Africa believe in the sustainability of the brand, foregoing an opportunity to drop their allegiance to a "guerrilla caliph" and instead renewing their pledges. Efforts to gauge the possibility of an Islamic State comeback "After the Caliphate" would be wise to consult its previous rise to power before 2014, a period that is understudied and widely misunderstood—despite the fact that the Islamic State has regularly published on its insurgency doctrine and noted its pre-caliphate roots. As part of a larger investigation of how the group gained its caliphate, we recently published an article titled "Black Ops: Islamic State Innovation in Irregular Warfare" (*Studies in Conflict and Terrorism*) that investigates the evolution of a sophisticated style of insurgency that experimented with the use of special operations. Below, we summarize our results for the policy community and present the findings for those interested in how militant tactics and strategies are evolving.

Why would insurgents develop a special operations capability, and what exactly does that look like? In an era where state militaries rely on well-resourced special operations forces and use them at an unprecedented rate, little attention has been paid to militant development of a parallel capability. Much of this neglect is compounded by the fact that insurgent operations are often clandestine in nature, a mix of terror and guerilla tactics, and vary by village, region, and country. Sorting through this complexity to find examples of special operations is a difficult task and requires a great deal of conceptual sorting. Our research into Islamic State of Iraq/Islamic State of Iraq and Sham (a.k.a. ISIS) claims and documents from 2006-2014 revealed three anomalous operations that we felt qualified as special operations.

What Makes Special Operations, Special?

This is a matter of perspective for the actor executing the operations. The literature that examines special operations and the forces that execute them focuses on Western militaries and the explosion of various special operations capabilities since World War II. A special operation can be distinguished from conventional tactical operations by the unit used, its high level of training, and the use of specialized equipment and tactics. Most importantly, special operations draw their "specialness" from the degree of impact the operation has on the campaign or overall conflict. For example, if a specialized unit seizes a bridge that will support a local attack, this is not a special operation despite the use of *special operations forces*. In this case, the effect is tactical and limited to a temporal advantage on the battlefield. However, if the bridge seizure was designed to deliver the *coup d' main*to help end a war entirely, this operation might be considered special. The other important component of these operations is the risk to the force executing the mission and the degree of political risk an actor incurs if the operation fails. With the bridge seizure example, tactical effects typically have lower political blowback as political actors may be unaware of small tactical engagements.

What Do Special Operations Look Like for Militant Groups?

Since militant groups typically operate from a position of weakness against more powerful state actors, the conventional means of attack for militant groups tend to be terror bombings, ambushes, and indirect fire attacks. Each allows a weaker actor to compete against stronger adversaries without expending significant resources in manpower and military materiel. Such operations typically serve as the heartbeat of militant efforts to maintain pressure on opponents and as such often have limited tactical effects. Instead, these tactics serve a larger and long-term strategy of exhaustion and/or attrition.

Akin to state actors, when militant groups need to generate an effect beyond the tactical level, they may turn to unorthodox equipment, training, and tactics to achieve those ends. In this regard, a militant group is developing a special operations capability even if the effects will be achieved in a singular operation. The United States' launch of the Doolittle Raid in 1942 exemplifies an actor's drive to develop a specific capability to achieve a strategic effect for a one-off operation. To deliver a message to Imperial Japan and the American public, President Roosevelt ordered a post-Pearl Harbor retaliatory bombing of Japan. To achieve this, military leaders developed a special operation that necessitated launching 15 Army Mitchell bombers from the Navy's USS Hornet, despite the risks to the aircrews and a precious aircraft carrier from a debilitated fleet. The experimental mission was a tremendous success, simultaneously surprising and embarrassing the Japanese high command, and bolstering morale on the American home front. This vignette highlights the role leaders and influence operations/propaganda have on amplifying a special operation and marking a strategic shift in fortune, something we found with Islamic State special operations.

In our investigation of non-state development of a special operations capability, we found evidence of three operations between 2007 and 2014—the period following the founding of the Islamic State movement up until its declaration as a so-called caliphate. The first was an effort in June 2007 to derail the Sunni Tribal Awakeningmovement before it spread farther than its origins in the Anbari provincial capital of Ramadi. The Battle of Donkey Island was a near miss for the group, with evidence of a very well-trained force that might have accomplished its mission of routing a weak tribal force had it not been accidentally discovered in its assault position. For the Islamic State of Iraq,

the mission was a disaster that could not have come at a worse time for them, and one that illustrated the political and operational risks for insurgents attempting special operations.

The next Islamic State special operation (that we could discover) took place in 2012, and was much more successful than the "Battle of Life"—the group's name for the Donkey Island mission. Named for their fallen leader Jarrah al-Shami, the Syrian-born leader of the failed 2007 special operation, the operation once again targeted key individuals of the Sunni Tribal Awakening, this time working with the government in the Anbari city of Haditha. Using a force specially trained over a series of months, the force —disguised in Iraqi SWAT uniforms—executed an audacious takeover of the entire city in order to find and execute Awakening leaders, ones who had been on an Islamic State of Iraq hit list since 2007.

The third operation, better known than its predecessors, was the Abu Ghraib prison breakout in 2013. In a sophisticated scheme, the Islamic State used classic raiding tactics to isolate the prison from external reinforcements while breaking into the prison with a wave of truck bombs timed to coincide with an internal breakout attempt. Five hundred high-ranking Islamic State veterans were released from the prison, and they went on to seed the organization during a crucial expansion in both Syria and Iraq that created the conditions for the establishment of the caliphate.

Analysis of the three operations reveal the logic behind Islamic State development of the special operation capability. The overriding characteristic of each is how qualitatively different they are from the normal pattern of guerilla or terror tactics. Each of these operations evidenced careful planning, rehearsals, and close coordination between multiple sub-units assigned different tasks for each of the operations. The group's top leaders centrally planned and directed these missions, in contrast with the normal style of decentralized guerilla operations planned and approved at local levels. These leaders also provided extensive resources for each operation, including human capital, which might account for the display of professional skill in all three. All of the operations relied on surprise as an important lever for a weak force to upend a stronger force. In each, leaders assigned hundreds of fighters from different areas to a single ad-hoc unit to execute the missions, and later disbanded the units to

avoid exposure and capture. Finally, in each operation, embedded media personnel documented aspects of the mission for future propaganda use.

These characteristics make up the intuitive aspects of a special operation, but to qualify for our research question, each of these events had to have the potential to produce a noticeable shift in the strategic fortunes of the group. The first failed, but the two subsequent missions were wildly successful in marking the start of a new campaign (called "Breaking of the Walls"), and in recapturing much-needed human capital for the ongoing expansion, respectively. In both cases, like the Doolittle Raid, the successes were leveraged into effective propaganda demonstrating that the group was making progress, convincing supporters and opponents that despite the long odds, success was inevitable. In any current assessment of Islamic State potential for a comeback, the successful execution of a future special operation might be a clear signal that the group leadership has assessed that they are ready to move to the next level of guerrilla warfare.

Some Takeaways

The secretive nature of special operations often captures the popular imagination, as evidenced by popular books and movies written by and about special operators. We often associate the daring raid and its accompanying glitz as the *raison d'être* of special operations forces. The irony is that special operation forces conduct a wide range of missions on a regular basis—such as long-term advisory efforts. Many of these operations do not produce noticeable campaign or war-ending results for years, yet the operations require a well-trained and maintained force to meet the near-continuous mission demands. Insurgents flip that dynamic; they cannot afford to maintain standing special operations forces due to cost or targeting by states, but still think about and execute special operations using special task forces recruited, trained, and later dispersed back into their normal insurgent cells. Yet, leaders who commission these missions execute them for the same reasons as their state counterparts: to achieve what Colin Gray calls actions that by design influence the campaign or conflict outcome greater than the engagement itself. Insurgent leaders understand that advocating protracted war and attritional struggles is easier said than done, and both their insurgent foot soldiers and supporters need

encouragement and visible evidence that their effort will be successful in the end. Just like with state actors, special operations is a high-risk, high-reward tool that can assist militant leaders in demonstrating just that, and much more.